



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number UH3MC30335, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems, \$5,448,239 (0% financed with nongovernmental sources). This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES: **Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success**

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a five year effort (August 1, 2016 through July 31, 2021) to strengthen systems to improve population level early childhood developmental health and family well-being in 28 communities across 12 states. The aspirational aim of this program was to increase age-appropriate developmental skills among three-year-old children and reduce developmental disparities. The goals that were prioritized in order to move towards the aspirational aim included:

- Create a Common Agenda/Shared Vision and Strategies
- Develop Shared Data Systems
- Promote Aligned and Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- Provide Backbone Support and Mechanisms for Continuous Communication Between State and Community
- Disseminate EC Development/Systems Information
- Integrate Early Developmental Promotion, Screening, Referral, Linkage, and Developmental Processes across and within sectors and communities
- Build Care Coordination Capacity
- Support Continuous Learning and Improvement Efforts
- Develop and Maintain Partnerships and Networks
- Family Leadership
- Build Public Will
- Advance Policies and Mobilize Funding to Sustain System Improvements

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a nationwide initiative to improve outcomes in population-based children's developmental health and family well-being, funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).



Overview of ECCS CoIIN

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood experiences (prenatal through age three) in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place, and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems-building initiatives.

For full details, please refer to our manuscript, [Exploring a Framework for Early Childhood Systems Maturity: A Case Study of the Evaluation of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network](#), published in *Infants & Young Children*, April/June 2023.

NICHQ is an independent, 501(c) (3) non-profit organization whose mission is to improve children's health. For nearly two decades, NICHQ has helped organizations and professionals who share its mission make breakthrough improvements, so children and families live healthier lives. To learn more about the work of NICHQ, please visit our website at <https://www.nichq.org/>.

ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Introduction

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood (prenatal through age three) experiences in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems building initiatives.

As ECCS CoIIN system building leaders worked together with their partners to embrace a collective impact framework, develop a vision, articulate shared goals and activities, and identify indicators of progress, there was a growing recognition that a developmental framework of systems building work is needed to articulate the nuances of each state's system building activities, successes, and challenges. Each state and community began this work in different starting points and progressed at varying paces. One state's or community's success may have been very different than another State's or community's success depending on their starting point. Understanding and comparing their progress requires a deep awareness of their starting point and progression or their system's "maturity".

A developmental framework of the progression of each state and community as well as the collective successes and challenges of systems-level work of the ECCS CoIIN states and communities was created to define, measure and articulate "system maturity". The process articulated in the framework is not always linear, and progression may not necessarily be sustained. System building is complex and like tools such as the [Systems Practice Workbook](#), the framework does not make these challenges any less complex, but it provides a way to embrace that complexity and work toward a more effective system. As such, the system maturity framework acknowledges the complexity of systems building while providing a simplified frame for assessing one's status and acting as a guide towards forwarding systems development. The system maturity framework accelerated the shared understanding of how each state and community system was developing, identified what key activities accelerated progress, and provided a foundation for the collective evaluation of ECCS CoIIN.

What is System Maturity?

According to Wikipedia, maturity, as it relates to developmental models, is defined as "a measurement of the ability of an organization for continuous improvement in a particular discipline."

In the context of ECCS CoIIN, system maturity was adapted to mean "a framework to measure the ability of multiple organizations, across a plethora of disciplines and sectors, to collectively work toward system improvements in order to support optimal child and family well-being".

Maturity models generally contain an assessment and a set of levels that correspond to outcomes at each level. For the system maturity model for ECCS CoIIN, levels correlating to developmental tasks of infants and young children resonated with the professionals and teams involved. As such, the levels of the system maturity model developed for ECCS CoIIN include:

1. Perinatal (Awareness and Birth)
2. Infancy (Discovery and Engagement)
3. Toddlerhood (Exploration and Movement)
4. Preschool (Testing and Learning)
5. Early School Years (Mastery and Expansion)

ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIN, 2021

Key tasks of each maturity level.

1. Perinatal (Awareness and Birth)

- Similar Developmental Task: Discovering toes and other body parts.
- System Task: Understand the environment and need.
- Activities in this level include: recognition and the work or tasks to be completed, the acknowledgment of a need for connection (or partnership), an effort to increase awareness, the identification of stakeholders and potential partners, the defining or mapping of what exists, and the identification of needs.

2. Infancy (Discovery and Engagement)

- Similar Developmental Task: Learning to play Peek A Boo.
- System Task: Engage people within the environment.
- Activities in this level include: convening stakeholders, identifying, and assigning roles, and brainstorming what is possible; understanding the overlap in priorities, potential collaboration, and creating buy-in for the development of partnerships and shared priorities; developing infrastructure to support or formalize collaboration/partnerships like establishing MOU's, identifying backbone organizations, strategic planning, and/or establishing meetings and regular check-ins processes

3. Toddlerhood (Exploration and Movement)

- Similar Developmental Task: Taking First Steps.
- System Task: Navigate and move forward within the environment.
- Activities in this level include: developing processes for accomplishing tasks, formalizing operational agreements including data sharing agreements, and spending time aligning and articulating goals, priorities and work plans or strategic plans.

4. Preschool (Testing and Learning)

- Similar Developmental Task: Singing Alphabet Song.
- System Task: Learning and testing, trying new things.
- Activities in this level include: testing and measurement of different strategies and initiatives to quantify outcomes allowing for the development of targeted and informed solutions that are more likely to succeed.

5. Early School Years (Mastery and Expansion)

- Similar Developmental Task: Learning to identify letters and numbers.
- System Task: Mastery and Ongoing Learning.
- Activities in this level include: Scaling, spreading, and sustaining tested and proven strategies for wider impact, data driven decision making to institutionalize community led systems change.



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES: **Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success**

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Key Examples from ECCS CoIIN

As the ECCS CoIIN project concluded, the participating states provided reflection on their strategies for building systems, what worked well and where there were challenges and barriers. Patterns have emerged from the analysis of those reflections that are instructive in articulating a framework with distinct stages of maturity for developing and managing early childhood systems. Mapping the activities and successes of the ECCS CoIIN teams to the levels of the emergent early childhood systems maturity framework allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the progression for each state and community.

Further, as states worked to develop and implement strategies to address the unique needs of their constituencies, there were also patterns illuminated that demonstrate what conditions drove movement between the stages of the framework. These drivers seem to be the mechanisms that support the progression of work into the next stage of maturity, as well as the cause of regression that also takes place in systems when conditions are lacking certain elements. In some cases, they may contribute to a stasis or stagnation wherein states seem stuck at a maturity stage. The following describes the common conditions seen at each level of maturity as well as the drivers (progression and regression) that spearhead movement between the stages.

Maturity Level: Awareness and Birth (Perinatal)

Key Qualities:

- Awareness of work
- What services and supports exist in state and targeted community?
- Identification of Early Childhood System (ECS) needs
- Identification of potential partners
- Initial inclusion in larger discussion/environment

Key elements of progression:

- Both awareness and understanding of goals and inclusion in conversations
- Engagement of stakeholders or expansion of stakeholder involvement



The Perinatal stage is distinctively characterized by the lack of coordination and awareness that exists but is born by a desire to build awareness and coordination. It is the starting point, initiation, or birth of activity to increase understanding about what exists with a goal towards the identification of need around an issue. This stage might best be characterized by the adage, “you don’t know what you don’t know”. From a system building perspective, this stage is the absence of collaboration, where a program or even an individual is operating in isolation but has identified a need to develop partnerships as a mechanism for strengthening or expanding their own work. Within this stage, it is sometimes easier to identify by what is missing or needed rather than what exists and is shaped by a willingness to understand the answer to both sides of that equation.

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIN, 2021

The need for relationships and partnership are an important element that characterizes this stage, wherein individual entities have identified a need for connection but may be inhibited by a lack of awareness about what exists, a lack of trusted relationships, competition among the stakeholders for resources, an inability or lack of capacity to work together, and/or a misalignment with priorities between stakeholders. The goal of this stage is recognition and the work or tasks to be completed include the acknowledgment of a need for connection (or partnership), an effort to increase awareness, the identification of stakeholders and potential partners, the defining or mapping of what exists, and the identification of needs. Movement is facilitated in this stage as partners' awareness evolves more to understanding of the state and community conditions, and there is an intentional inclusion or engagement of others in the development and evolution of conversations.

Maturity Level: Discovery and Engagement (Infancy)

Key Qualities:

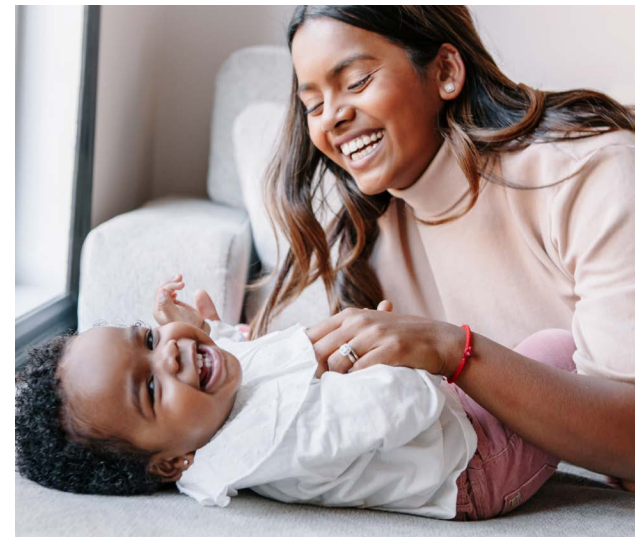
- Building relationships
 - Engaging with others meaningfully
 - Building trust
 - Creating a shared understanding or common awareness
- Beginning engagement in larger environment
 - Identifying roles for stakeholders
- Getting “footing” and understanding of work
 - Connecting dots between programs, initiatives, stakeholders, systems, agencies
- Creating buy-in for collaboration/partnership
- Conducting readiness assessments
 - Getting ready to do the work

Key elements of progression:

- Defining partners who need to be included and actively developing those partnerships (i.e., parents, pediatricians, etc.)
- Aligning priorities with partners
- Building trust
- Focusing on collaboration and strengthening partnerships
- Demonstrating need for data systems and developing processes to integrate data collection (i.e., shared data, common indicators, etc.)

Key elements of regression:

- Starting implementation without partnerships in place — “riding the bicycle while you build it.”
- Unwillingness to partner
- Turnover of key leaders/partners driving relationship building
- Resource scarcity and resource competition



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES: **Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success**

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoLIN, 2021

At this level, stakeholders are expanding from the development of their own awareness to building a shared awareness about what exists. Stakeholders begin to connect dots between programs, initiatives, stakeholders, and agencies within the system to identify and understand the services and supports that exists and then to find common ground. Through that awareness building and common ground seeking, stakeholders begin to collectively build trust among one another—the predominant feature of this stage. That trust building, in turn, can promote the buy-in stakeholders need to commit to partnering.

Significant effort and time are spent in this stage building the shared awareness and the trust. This stage is relational in scope and can take considerable time as stakeholders lay the groundwork to move from stakeholder engagement to partnership. However, the partnership development that does occur during this stage is localized, often not yet crossing sectors or communities. State and local connection can begin during this time, but leadership seems more generally diffused or non-existent. A focus on capacity building or policy implementation is also fairly limited in this stage as well, with little capacity for stakeholders to do anything other than relationship development.

It becomes evident in this stage, the lack of infrastructure that exists for sustaining partnerships and the foundational needs for developing that infrastructure to facilitate movement. Other ways the lack of infrastructure is characterized include:

- Non-existent partnerships.
- A lack of leadership.
- Minimal data collection or infrastructure for data collection.
- No accountability measures or governance.
- No alignment of priorities, vision, or goals.
- A lack of readiness to implement new projects, programs, or initiatives.

The investment in creating a shared awareness helps stakeholders assess their readiness for building something new and in fact, readiness assessments are a feature of the work that happens in this stage. Some of the necessary foundation building can also happen in this stage, facilitated by the strengthening and deepening of relationships. This can include:

- Convening stakeholders, identifying, and assigning roles, and brainstorming what is possible.
- Understanding the overlap in priorities, potential collaboration, and creating buy-in for the development of partnerships and shared priorities.
- Developing infrastructure to support or formalize collaboration/partnerships like establishing MOUs, identifying backbone organizations, strategic planning, and/or establishing meetings and regular check-ins.
- Identifying the need for data, assessing data collection structures, and beginning to coalesce on shared data collection and potential data sharing strategies; and
- Conducting readiness assessments.

Infancy is the first stage where regression is possible. Regression in this stage can occur when implementation of initiatives is started without the right partnerships in place to support the implementation. Partnerships may not be in place for several reasons, including an unwillingness to partner, a lack of buy-in, resource scarcity or competition among partners for resources, and the turnover of key individuals leading the partnership development. Conversely, the defining, and intentional development of key partnerships is one of the primary ways to progress into the next stage. That process of partner development, and a focus on priority alignment and the integration of data, are strategies that help to engender trust in the relationships—other key elements of progression.

ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Maturity Level: Exploration and Direction (Toddlerhood)

Key Qualities:

- Identifying goal and working towards it/being held accountable
 - Developing formal agreements and articulated processes for accomplishing work
 - Data sharing agreements
- Coordinating with others to achieve goals
 - Setting clear direction for work
 - Goal alignment
- Building Infrastructure to allow for implementation
 - Learning how to work together
 - Acting on priorities
 - Attempting “small p” policy changes
- Investing in capacity building
- Ongoing Commitment to Collaboration
 - Partnership sustainability
 - Identifying leaders or champions of work
- Integrating families, providers, non-traditional partners



Key elements of progression:

- Flexibility: ability to adjust to change in environment or circumstance
- Leveraging resources
- Integrating shared data collection and/or Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)
- Leadership/champion in place to coordinate and facilitate work at state or local level.
- Scaling and/or replication of partnerships
- Generating political will from strength of partnerships
- Information and idea exchange among partners



Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Key elements of regression:

- Lack of accountability with data agreements
- Unwillingness to partner
- Lack of accountability with partners
- Turnover of partners
- Turnover of champion/leader
- Lack of data to demonstrate need and/or outcomes.
- “Bad actor” partner
- Community or state crisis (e.g., COVID, economic downturn)
- Coordination without shared vision or planning

In the Toddlerhood stage, partnerships grow, deepen, and formalize, laying the foundation to move from building relationships to working together. Partnerships operate with intention and planning, and they become collaborations. It is within this stage that collective actions begin. Partnerships are laying foundation and completing infrastructural advancements that include developing processes for accomplishing tasks, formalizing operational agreements including data sharing agreements, and spending time aligning and articulating goals, priorities and work plans or strategic plans. Backbone organizations support the coordination of this work at this stage. More formal governance processes are also articulated with roles identified for partners and accountability mechanisms put in place. The emphasis on partnership development and a movement towards collaboration generates momentum while providing a foundation that in turns supports increased partnership and the ability to ‘level up’ in output.

Toddlerhood is a testing ground where collaborations are gaining their footing and implementation begins. Stakeholders within collaborations can more easily identify needs and potential solutions to address those needs. The solutions are co-created in this stage and partners can learn how to work together. Relationships are tested and new infrastructure helps protect the trial-and-error process. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) may be introduced, further strengthening the trial/error process, and more formal data streamlining occurs when data agreements and data sharing are also integrated and tested. An emphasis on using more data to inform implementation and decision making allows for data informed adjustments to be made and improvements to be captured. This is also the time that collaborations can focus on building capacity among the partners, and to integrate and build capacity with providers and families.



Though state and local connection began in the last stage, there is more focus and success with state and local connection at this stage. For many states, formalizing a state role for a facilitator (or champion or leader) to spearhead the work helps formalize and ensure the connections. Leadership from the state looks like empowerment and guidance with state support promoting multi-sector engagement. The state provides support for local partnerships, and efforts are made to align state priorities with local priorities. Solutions are community driven with state support and communities are included in state decision making.

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Collaboration combined with infrastructure development are two important factors that when achieved, allow for stakeholders to adjust their approaches to changing circumstances. That ability is an indication that states are no longer focusing on the operations of partnerships, and instead can focus on identifying, testing, and spreading strategies for implementation. Leaders or champions can facilitate this progression, helping to coordinate the efforts. Integration of data and CQI help to demonstrate impact and can be especially important for the scaling or replication of partnerships across communities and states. The strength of partnerships can support the development and nurturing of political will for an issue as well. However, regression is possible as partnerships remain delicate and tenuous. Issues like an unwillingness to partner, or other priorities that serve as a roadblock to collaboration are factors that divert focus away from collaboration and back to partnership engagement. The delicate nature of these partnerships and their practice with collaboration at this stage makes them susceptible to stagnation or regression when turnover among the partners occurs. Finally, the process of navigating and developing new partnerships is time consuming and the inherently slow progression can serve as a barrier to success when stakeholders do not see immediate benefits from the investment of time and resources.

Maturity Level: Testing and Innovation (Preschool)

Key Qualities:

- Testing strategies to achieve work
- Working on innovation to address problem at hand
- Creating solutions
- Quantifying work (i.e., measuring progress)
- Attempting replication or promising practice
- Successfully working together, despite turnover
- Scaling, expanding, spreading work
- Begin thinking about sustainability

Key elements of progression:

- Measuring partnership or collaboration
- Institutionalized partnership
- Withstanding change of staff and leaders
- Use of measurement to justify expansion or replication of work
- Tweaking implementation to adapt to community need
- Leveraging public and private funds
- Multi-sector collaboration
- Creating a permanent state level position for coordinating/leading work
- Working towards policy development including working with policymakers
- Sustained or institutionalized infrastructure (e.g., universal registration system)
- Family leadership and decision making
- Political champion



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Key elements of regression:

- Lack of funding, decreased funding or limited funding
- Not funding partnership development
- Not implementing according to an aligned vision
- Scaling implementation without buy-in
- Lack of success with 'small p' implementation

This stage is characterized by implementation and measurement of key components of an infrastructure to move the system forward. This may include formalization of governing bodies, data sharing processes, legislative actions and/or unified practices and processes. Less focus is needed for partnership development because partners can work together more seamlessly buffered by institutionalized processes. Success for partners at this stage includes an ability to withstand turnover and processes in place to measure the partnership and collaboration. Stakeholders see value in partnership that is further demonstrated through measurement. Success in this stage is also bolstered by the infrastructure development that has occurred in previous stages contributing to greater system capacity. Emphasis then is placed on the testing and measurement of different strategies and initiatives to quantify outcomes. The integration of measurement and data analysis through both CQI initiatives and more formal data collection and evaluation strategies, allows for the development of targeted and informed solutions that are more likely to succeed. Testing solutions in turn, generates more learning, and can allow for implementation of more successful upstream solutions focused on prevention and promotion, not just intervention.

With data demonstrating success, communities can turn to innovation and scaling of initiatives. Replication is possible at this stage, with communities duplicating the infrastructure that supports implementation, the partnerships that exist to spearhead the implementation, and the successful initiatives and programs. In some cases that replication may look like expansion to a statewide investment in planning or infrastructure development. Data collection also allows for a greater emphasis on social determinants of health, and more systemic solutions that can address the determinants as a whole. Like the stages that proceed this one, the replication of systems infrastructure, especially as it relates to partnership development, is one that can take considerable time to develop, but the initial creation can serve as a model for guiding and even accelerating the process when attempting to replicate or scale across communities.

Data collection and sharing also allows for partners to understand the drivers of the work and to begin to address ways to preserve those drivers for long-term sustainability. Initiatives are normalized and integrated into regular practice bringing about a need to focus on sustainability. As collaborations, communities and states look towards sustainability, they can also begin focusing on the use of policy as a lever for accomplishing replication or sustainability goals.

Movement within this stage is demonstrated by the measurement of the partnership or collaboration, a final step in the institutionalization of the partnerships. Having infrastructure in place that both supports collaboration and supports implementation are what strengthens the system and allows it to withstand turnover at this stage. It also replicates conditions that make it easier to support and ultimately elevate families in the collaboration, implementation, and decision-making roles. It can also support the expansion of collaboration across sectors. Data systems and integration have evolved in this stage to demonstrate positive outcomes of implementation. They are also robust enough to allow for the adaptation of implementation to successfully meet specific community needs. The security provided by the institutionalization of partnerships and system infrastructure allows for the focus on leveraging funds and ongoing sustainability. The regression in this stage occurs when the infrastructure begins to break down, the number one cause of which is lack of funding or decreased funding. A lack of resources to support collaboration and partnership can also cause stagnation or regression. Finally, implementing without alignment or without buy-in is also an indication of break down in collaboration that can lead to regression.



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Maturity Level: Adoption and Maintenance (Early School Years)

Key Qualities:

- Leverage and braid funds for long-term sustainability
- Sustaining innovations/changes
- Creating infrastructure with sustainability in mind
- Using measurable outcomes to continually assess partners, progress, and goals
- Using outcomes illustrated by defined CQI and formal data collection practices to justify and leverage continued work
- Using data for improvement to maintain an adaptable system that is responsive to evolving needs and poised to leverage emergent opportunities
- Increasing capacity of providers promoting sustainability through saturation
- Taking advantage of opportunities
- Succeeding with replication
- Leveraging public policy to bolster work.
- Implementing policy

Key elements of regression:

- Inability to leverage and/or braid funding
- Breakdown in data collection/implementation
- Loss of political champion (e.g., legislator, change in state party leadership)
- Public policy that interrupts, challenges, or stops work

Sustainability is the central task that occurs during this stage. Generally, a culture of CQI and data collection and sharing are endemic, generating evidence of outcomes and support for replication and expansion. Decision making in this stage is data driven and supports the thoughtful build of infrastructure while keeping sustainability in mind. It also helps to institutionalize community led systems change. Successful replication informed by data helps drive continuity of initiatives across communities with scaling and spreading seen commonly in this stage. Continuity is further supported by the pursuit of mutually aligned goals and the weaving of 'common threads' throughout different initiatives.

The ability to leverage funds from the success of initiatives and demonstrated impact is also significant in this stage. This can look like braiding funding to sustain current work and leveraging new funds to expand and develop new initiatives. Initiatives may also innovate and expand in response to state and local context. For example, expanding focus from birth to 3-year-old children to birth to 5-year-old children, or integrating infant mental health across the state. And in some cases that can look like universal access to an initiative.

Leadership is an important component of sustainability with more community champions developed and community voice helping shape alignment and implementation. The integration of family leadership is prevalent and political champions emerge to usher state policy through. Policy change becomes possible with more systemic goals like governance, coordination, and long-term funding sustainability.



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES: **Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success**

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

Though sustainability is the goal and can be institutionalized, it is not always so. Disruptions to funding are the biggest challenge that leads to regression in this stage. There can be many causes to the inability to leverage or sustain funding including a loss of a political champion, a change in party or priority at the state legislative or gubernatorial level, or a breakdown in infrastructure that interrupts system success.

The term “collective impact” was first referenced in a 2011 article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review.¹ CI initiatives continue to pursue social change in a variety of areas and momentum around the approach continues to grow. CI is an approach often used by early childhood system builders. CI can generally be categorized by phases of “what is being done”. The simplified intersectionality between the phases of the collective impact approach and the stages of the maturity framework can be delineated as follows:

Before implementation of the CI approach can begin, the organizations and individuals involved should be at the Infancy Maturity Level (Discovery and Engagement). The Perinatal Stage is too early to begin a CI approach as the goal of this stage is recognition and the work or tasks to be completed include the acknowledgment of a need for connection (or partnership), an effort to increase awareness, the identification of stakeholders and potential partners, the defining or mapping of what exists, and the identification of needs. A need may be identified during this Level which warrants a CI approach and the partners at the table may align to embrace a CI approach to address that need, however this demonstrates the system is more aware and coordinated to move forward (in the Infancy Level). The readiness for CI assessment may be completed during the Perinatal Level to assist the group considering using the collective impact approach to determine if CI is the right approach for the identified issue.

Once in the Infancy Level or higher, the CI Phases that can be implemented most successfully include:

CI Phase 1: Assess Readiness

- Conduct a readiness and landscape assessment (assess complexity and urgency of problem, assess history of collaboration, identify existing local collaborations, identify potential champions, determine resources)

CI Phase 2: Initiate Action

- Kick off steering committee
- Begin community outreach
- Create baseline landscape and data mapping
- Secondary research on other collaboratives

CI Phase 3: Organize for Impact

- Create common agenda: clear problem definition, common vision, population level goal, basic theory of change
- Develop high level population goal
- Solicit and incorporate community perspective/voice

¹ Stanford Social Innovation Review - REFERENCE NEEDED.



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES: **Applying a System Maturity Framework to Understand Progress and Success** Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

The most success will happen if the collective group is at the Toddlerhood Maturity Level (Exploration and Direction) when beginning the implementation phase of CI:

CI Phase 4: Begin Implementation

- Determine shared measurement and aligned strategies to create mutually reinforcing activities
- Develop working groups to implement strategies
- Introduce the initiative to the broader community; share what you are trying to accomplish
- Create/select a backbone organization to sustain the work moving forward

Phase 5 of CI can best be done if the collective group is at the Preschool Maturity Level (Testing and Innovation)

CI Phase 5: Sustain Action and Impact

- Begin implementing strategies and measuring indicators
- Collect and use data to learn and refine strategies, and identify quick wins
- Evolve steering committee and working group composition to match adaptive strategies
- Continue ongoing activities to share initiative progress and gain community input

Although CI is not the right approach for every problem as the process can take a long time and requires significant resources to sustain, the more mature the system is, the more a CI initiative can be sustained and any changes (in resources from partners making new investments to differing priorities from partners changing their practices) can be absorbed without significant impacts.

Conclusion

Growth and innovation are important goals as stakeholders work towards ensuring the health development of all children during their early years. The recognition that coordination and collaboration are key for the connection of services and the process for creating a system that promotes access while reducing inequities related to race, income, and place is increasingly supported by evidence of impact. Communities can achieve that growth through the investment of time and human resources into the intentional development of partnership that in turn, form the high-quality system of services that give young children an optimal start. Though this time intensive strategy can lack immediate system level outcomes for children and families, communities are recognizing how the time investments can be the catalyst for the development of a foundational infrastructure that yields contributions to the long-term growth and development of families in the early years.

The ECCS CoIIN initiative benefitted from application of the system maturity framework as it accelerated the shared understanding of how each system was developing, identified what key activities accelerated progress, and provided a foundation for the collective evaluation. Other early childhood system building initiatives can accelerate their understanding of progress by accounting for the maturity of each system, where they are starting from and how their planned activities within each level of maturity leads to successes in the next level.

This case study is one of six developed through the ECCS CoIIN initiative. This series of six Case Studies identify key accelerators of early childhood system building, highlighting what was learned from the ECCS CoIIN Initiative and share bright spots of states and communities. All six Case Studies can be found at <https://www.nichq.org/project/early-childhood-comprehensive-systems-collaborative-improvement-and-innovation-network-eccs>

Article

Swanson, Loraine MPH; Menon, Meera PhD; Minogue, Amber MA; Russell, Rebecca MSPH; Berns, Scott MD, MPH, FAAP. Exploring a Framework for Early Childhood Systems Maturity: A Case Study of the Evaluation of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN)
[Infants & Young Children 36\(2\):p 93-109, April/June 2023.](#) | DOI: 10.1097/YC.0000000000000235

